



NATURE of the BEAST

Animals in Japanese Paintings & Prints

CREATE YOUR OWN CRYPTO-ZOO

Suggested Grade Level: Middle Elementary (3rd, 4th, and 5th grades)

Subject: Visual arts, Language Arts

Estimated Time: 1-3 class sessions

Introduction

Some of the animals of Japan include monkeys, ducks, mice, and frogs—as well as imaginary animals such as dragons, kappas (river imps), and foxes that turn into beautiful and mysterious women. People invented mythological animals to explain natural and other phenomena: storms, missing travelers, weird lights seen at night. The stories the Japanese tell about these animals are fascinating, and they often discuss the special attributes that each animal has.

A kappa, for example, is an imp that lurks around riverbanks and eats unsuspecting travelers. It looks something like a turtle and something like a human. It is very cunning and extremely strong. Its special attribute is a magic liquid: The kappa has an indentation in its skull filled with this liquid—and if the liquid ever spills out, the kappa becomes weak.

Knowing this, a clever person can outwit the kappa. Although wicked, the kappa is also very polite. Therefore, a traveler should always bow to strangers he or she meets, especially scaly ones hanging around bridges and rivers. The kappa will bow back, and the magic liquid will drain from its head, leaving it ineffectual and weak. It always pays to be polite.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

1. Learn about the attributes of mythological animals.
2. Use artworks from the Pacific Asia Museum as the basis for understanding these ideas and for engaging student critical thinking and writing.

Key Terms

attributes
cryptozoology
mythology, mythological

Instructional Materials

- From *Nature of the Beast* website:
 - ❖ *Dragon in the Clouds*, Kishi Ganku (1756–1838), Circa 1800, Scroll painting, ink and color on silk, Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. George A. Brumder, 1988.78.6B
 - ❖ *Two Shi-Shi Lions*, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), 19th century, Woodblock print, ink on paper, Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Dr. George W. Housner, 2001.21.12
 - ❖ *Detail of a Kappa from the Manga, Vol. 3*, Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), Japan, 1815, Leaf from a bound book, woodblock print, ink on paper, Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Mrs. Elizabeth Lowrie in memory of Mr. Robert T. Lowrie, 1978.16.277B page
- Florence Sakada, *Japanese Children's Favorite Stories*. Tuttle Publishing, 3rd edition, 2003.
- [This website by an American living in Japan has extensive information on Japanese mythological animals: *The Face of Buddhism and Shintoism in Japanese Art* <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/buddhism.shtml>]
- Drawing and painting materials and/or magazines for collages

Discussion

Display or project artworks from *Nature of the Beast* showing the dragons, shi-shi lions, and the kappa. Discuss these mythological animals and their attributes. For example, the dragon's attributes in Japanese mythology include living underwater, the ability to cause storms, and great strength. The shi-shi dragon scares away evil spirits with its loud roar. The kappa threatens impolite travelers.

Some animals are shape-shifters. *Japanese Children's Favorite Stories* includes a tale about a badger (the *tanuki* or raccoon-dog) that turns into a tea kettle.

Ask students to name mythological animals they know about and list their attributes. Note that even today there is a strong interest in cryptozoology (*crypto* means “hidden” or “secret”), the search for animals rumored but not proven to exist. What are some mythological animals that people search for even today? (Loch Ness Monster, Yeti)

Activities

In small groups, students brainstorm a list of attributes they would like to give to a mythological animal. Attributes could include the ability to leap across rivers, cause rainbows, to swim through dirt—the list is endless.

Students brainstorm the physical manifestation of these attributes; for example, a super-fast lizard might have giant wheels, a rainbow beast would incorporate rainclouds and the sun, and so on. Students work together to draw or paint their mythological beast or cut out pictures from magazines to create a patchwork animal. Groups present their animals to the class and together create a crypto-zoo.

Extensions for Older Students

Ryunosuke Akutagawa wrote a novella called *Kappa* that is a comment on Japan in the early twentieth century. Students may read the book and discuss the ways a mythological animal can be used as a vehicle for analyzing the behavior of contemporary humans.

Reading Extensions

Many books and movies enjoyed by students include imaginary animals and beings. Ask students to compile a **bestiary** (an encyclopedia of animals) of imaginary animals found in the Harry Potter books, the Lord of the Rings, the Star Wars movies, and *Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

Standards

California State Framework for Reading and Language Arts

Reading Comprehension

Literary Response and Analysis



Dragon in the Clouds

Kishi Ganku (1756–1838)

Circa 1800

Scroll painting, ink and color on silk

Pacific Asia Museum Collection

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. George A. Brumder, 1988.78.6B

Nature of the Beast: Animals in Japanese Paintings and Prints

<http://www.pacificasiamuseum.org/japanesepaintings/>

copyright © 2005, the Pacific Asia Museum. All rights reserved. 46 North Los Robles Avenue, Pasadena, CA 91101



Two Shi-Shi Lions

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858)

19th century

Woodblock print, ink on paper

Pacific Asia Museum Collection

Gift of Dr. George W. Housner, 2001.21.12

Nature of the Beast: Animals in Japanese Paintings and Prints

<http://www.pacificasiamuseum.org/japanesepaintings/>

copyright © 2005, the Pacific Asia Museum. All rights reserved. 46 North Los Robles Avenue, Pasadena, CA 91101



Detail of a Kappa from the Manga, Vol. 3

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

Japan, 1815

Leaf from a bound book, woodblock print, ink on paper

Pacific Asia Museum Collection

Gift of Mrs. Elizabeth Lowrie in memory of Mr. Robert T. Lowrie, 1978.16.277B page